



## Early parenting styles and sexual offending behavior: A comparative study



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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 25 March 2016

#### Keywords:

Early parenting styles  
Distal factors  
Sexual offending  
Sexual offenders  
Pedophilic offenders

### ABSTRACT

Sexual offenders, in general, report problematic rearing practices from their parents, lacking however more empirical research on this topic regarding particular subtypes of offenders. The current study examined the relationship between early parenting styles and different types of sexual offending. A total of 113 sexual offenders (rapists, pedophilic and nonpedophilic child molesters), and 51 nonsexual offenders completed the EMBU (*My Memories of Upbringing*), the Brief Symptom Inventory, and the Socially Desirable Response Set Measure. Results showed that rapists were less likely to remember their fathers as being emotionally warm compared with nonsexual offenders and pedophilic child molesters. In addition, compared with rapists, pedophilic offenders perceived their mothers as having been less emotionally warm to them. Overall, results showed that certain developmental experiences with parents were able to distinguish between subtypes of offenders supporting an association between distal interpersonal factors and sexual offending. These findings may have important implications for early intervention and prevention of sexual crimes. Further research using larger samples of pedophilic child molesters is recommended.

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### 1. Introduction

Sexual offending represents a significant and widespread problem within our society. The empirical examination of its potential causes and risk factors is crucial to the development of effective prevention strategies as well as adequate treatment programs aiming to decrease the likelihood of sexual recidivism (e.g. Bumby & Hansen, 1997; Lee, Jackson, Pattison, & Ward, 2002; Ward & Siegert, 2002).

The achievements in this field of knowledge have been significant, evolving from the emphasis on single factors (e.g., cognitive distortions) to the acknowledgement of the role of different types of factors including biological, developmental, psychological, social, and situational (e.g. Bumby & Hansen, 1997; Hall & Hirschman, 1991, 1992; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Ward & Beech, 2006; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Indeed, a comprehensive theory of sexual offending should be multifactorial, proposing how developmental experiences, individual features, sociocultural aspects, and subsequent mechanisms result in important vulnerabilities (Ó Ciardha & Ward, 2013; Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Therefore, the conceptualization of this behavior presupposes the interaction between two general types of factors: *distal* (dispositional or vulnerability characteristics that result from developmental history) and *proximal* (state or contextual factors that trigger the underlying vulnerabilities; Ward & Hudson, 1998;

Ward & Siegert, 2002). Overall, the present study focused on the examination of the role of distal factors, in particular, the parental rearing practices experienced by sex offenders during childhood and adolescence.

#### 1.1. Early parent–child relationships and attachment style

Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) has clearly influenced research and understanding about the nature of human relationships across the life span (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). According to Bowlby (1969, 1973), the attachment system is basic and biologically adaptive leading the child to seek and maintain proximity to the primary attachment figure, particularly the mother. The quality of the responsiveness of the attachment figure is an important factor in the regulation of child's emotional experience as well as on child's later interpersonal functioning. Specifically, the same author proposed the concept of "internal working models" as internalized representations of the self and others that result from the nature of early attachment bonds. Thus, a child whose parents are emotionally available and supportive will be able to develop a self model as being lovable and competent. In turn, experiences of emotional unavailability and lack of support will contribute to the perception of the self as unlovable and incompetent (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Indeed, in the first years of life, family is considered as primarily responsible for child's care and development, and the parenting style experienced is proposed as a key precursor of the child's attachment pattern (Davids, Londt, & Wilson, 2015). Particularly, attachment security has been associated with parental attitudes of affection, emotional

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warmth and the promotion of the child's autonomy and independence. In turn, attachment insecurity has been related to a parental style characterized by indifference, neglect, or overprotection, representing a significant pathogenic variable (Bogaerts, Vanheule, & Declercq, 2005; Giotakos, Vaidakis, Markianos, Spandoni, & Christodoulou, 2004; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979).

The majority of the available studies aiming to investigate the individual's perception of early parenting behavior have been conducted with the *Parental Bonding Instrument* (PBI; Parker et al., 1979), which is comprised of two dimensions (care and overprotection/control), or with the *Egna Minnen Beträffande Uppfostran — My Memories of Upbringing* (EMBU; Perris, Jacobsson, Linndstrom, Von Knorring, & Perris, 1980) which is comprised of three dimensions (emotional warmth, rejection, and overprotection), separately for the mother and the father (Petrowski et al., 2009). In all, it has been found that parental rearing behavior, particularly lack of maternal care, is a significant factor for the vulnerability of psychopathology in adulthood (Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002; Gao, Raine, Chan, Venables, & Mednick, 2010; Petrowski et al., 2009). Additionally, Baker and Hoeger (2012) found that parental warmth was associated with better intra and interpersonal adjustment, self-regulation and academic performance. In turn, parental rejection was related to internalizing clinical symptoms such as anxiety whereas parental overcontrol was most associated with hypomanic activation and psychoticism. Overall, the quality of parental rearing practices in the first years of life is proposed as a determinant factor of both child and adult interpersonal and emotional functioning.

### 1.2. Early parenting styles in sexual offenders

Within the sexual offending field, the Marshall and Barbaree's Integrated Theory (1990) was the first model to propose the influence of developmental adversities such as attachment problems and different forms of early abuse on this behavior. In a latter work, Marshall and Marshall (2000) underlined this assumption, considering that poor childhood relationships with parents constitute the first etiological step to sexual offending. Indeed, available literature has shown that sexual offenders' developmental histories are characterized by high levels of family dysfunction, interpersonal problems and different types of abuse (sexual, physical, emotional and neglect; e.g., Burk & Burkhart, 2003; Connolly & Woollons, 2008; Lee et al., 2002; Maniglio, 2012).

Regarding recalled rearing behavior from parents, sexual offenders, in general, report inconsistent and problematic practices including high levels of neglect, rejection, control, and low levels of care (Bogaerts et al., 2005; Craissati, McClurg, & Browne, 2002; Marsa et al., 2004). Recent studies aiming to describe the early family environment of adult sex offenders found that many of them had witnessed domestic violence situations, had a negative relationship with the mother, and had been separated from their parents (Londt & Roman, 2014). Furthermore, using a sample of non-admitting sex offenders it was found that many had been raised without a paternal figure, and when father was present, their relationship was frequently marked by physical and emotional abuse (Davids et al., 2015). These developmental experiences are likely associated with the development of an insecure attachment style which is proposed as a risk factor for later sexual offending (e.g. Burk & Burkhart, 2003; Maniglio, 2012; Marshall, 1989, 1993; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Marshall & Marshall, 2000). Specifically, according to Burk and Burkhart (2003), insecure attachment functions as a diathesis for this behavior given that it may inhibit the development of basic self-regulation skills, resulting in distorted self-perceptions and negative emotional states. This difficulty to deal with emotional states can result in a lack of control, which in the presence of sexual desire, can be related to the use of sex as a way to satisfy the individual's emotional and sexual needs (Ward & Beech, 2006).

In the last two decades, independent studies have compared different types of offenders on their perceptions of rearing behavior from both mother and father. Despite some variability across studies, in

general, findings seem to indicate a differential relationship between early maternal and paternal practices and later sexual offending subtypes (Simons, Wurtele, & Durham, 2008; Smallbone & Dadds, 1998; Smallbone & McCabe, 2003). Specifically, some studies have found that rapists and child molesters reported more problematic relationships with their fathers than with their mothers, although this seemed to be more frequent in rapists (Lisak, 1994; McCormack, Hudson, & Ward, 2002). When compared with nonoffenders, rapists reported higher father abusiveness whereas child molesters reported higher mother abusiveness (Giotakos et al., 2004).

Regarding attachment styles, contrary to child molesters who reported more anxious attachment bonds to both mother and father, rapists reported more avoidant attachment bonds particularly to the father (Simons et al., 2008).

Following a more specific purpose, Smallbone and Dadds (1998) found that intrafamilial child molesters reported more problematic relationships with their mothers whereas rapists remembered their fathers as having been particularly uncaring, abusive, and violent to them. In a later work, both rapists and intrafamilial child molesters were found to present higher rates of childhood insecure attachment with their fathers compared with extrafamilial child molesters (Smallbone & McCabe, 2003).

Moreover, regarding the factors associated with recidivism among sex offenders, besides important indicators of pedophilia (e.g., phallometrically assessed sexual arousal to children, having a boy victim, having extrafamilial victims; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Seto, Abramowitz, & Barbaree, 2008), a negative relationship with mothers was the only developmental variable related to sexual recidivism (Hanson & Bussière, 1998).

Nonetheless, dysfunctional early relational experiences with parents are characteristic of both sexual and nonsexual offenders (e.g. Maniglio, 2012; McCormack et al., 2002). Accordingly, further research on this topic is necessary to clarify the hypothesis of whether specific combinations of parent-child relationships are related to specific types of sexual offending behavior (e.g., higher frequency of problematic rearing practices from father and mother, respectively in rapists and child molesters; e.g., Giotakos et al., 2004; Smallbone & Dadds, 1998).

Furthermore, sex offenders are a heterogeneous group and there are different subtypes and categories likely with specific features and therapeutic needs (e.g., Gannon, Collie, Ward, & Thakker, 2008; Groth, 1979; Knight & Prentky, 1990; Sigre-Leirós, Carvalho, & Nobre, 2015a,b). Given the higher risk of sexual recidivism associated with pedophilia (Seto, 2009; Seto et al., 2008), for preventive and clinical purposes it may be relevant to discriminate child molesters with and without pedophilic interests. Specifically, pedophilia (or pedophilic disorder) consists of a paraphilic disorder characterized by "recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 697). Besides different assessment methods such as self-report, viewing time, and phallometry, pedophilia can be also assessed on the basis of offender's sexual behavior history (Seto, 2009). In particular, child sexual abusers with boy victims, multiple child victims, younger or unrelated victims are more likely to be pedophiles compared with offenders with only girl victims, a single child victim, older or related victims (Seto, 2009). All this information can be obtained using the *Screening Scale for Pedophilic Interests* (Seto & Lalumière, 2001), which is proposed by the authors as a useful research instrument when phallometric data are unavailable. Overall, empirical research on developmental experiences of subtypes of sex offenders, such as early parenting styles, may have important implications regarding increasingly effective early intervention and prevention strategies.

### 1.3. The present study

The present study examined the relationship between early parenting styles and different types of sexual offending behavior. Specifically, three

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